

ANTICIPATION

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"Even in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." In the centuries-long confrontation of hope with hopelessness, people of faith have been bouyed, literally held up, by the affirmation that even in the worst of circumstances there is redemptive possibility. ~~because God is no stranger to hopelessness.~~ *People of faith have also been people of God because*
It's not that we believe God will transform ~~the~~ circumstances so that, *for instance,* the dead princess is seen finally merely to be sleeping. That's the stuff of fairytales. What we try to hold on to is that even in the worst of circumstances, God will be present to work redemptively. That *the ground of our* is hope.

Our ability to believe that is sorely tried on occasion. Last Sunday night for instance, most of us apparently spent a few hours in the valley of the shadow of death, watching the ABC movie, "The Day After," a portrayal of a nuclear exchange and the aftermath in Lawrence, Kansas.

There wasn't a lot of hope in that program. Those who were not killed in the initial blast, are critically ill with radiation sickness. There were warnings aplenty

about the possible emotional effects of watching the film, particularly for young children. *because of the abuse of much hope* And afterward, some members of the very distinguished panel seemed literally

free from the haziness of
bureaucratic language

~~angry~~ because ~~the~~ people had the opportunity to see what
it was they ~~were~~ ^{an} paying their taxes to do to life and
the earth. ~~In what must be one of the most articulate~~
^{In an} ~~and~~ eloquent examples of Orwellian Doublespeak, Henry
Kissinger rumbled on about how unfortunate to become emo-
tional about so ^{important + complicated} ~~complex~~ a matter as the end of life in
the world.

Even in the valley... Much of the story took place
in a hospital: and during the evening it became for me
a metaphor for the valley of the shadow, ^{and as I was drawn} ~~and I waited~~
for God. Would he be there? Was it possible that in
this wretched, hopeless situation, God would show? Could
faith find hope, even here?

into the story
I found that
I was
waiting

I had about given up: had about concluded that the
film was basically a nihilistic document of ultimate des-
pair. And then two things happened. That physician -
himself dying and knowing it, kept on treating other dying
people: kept on keeping on ~~and I found hope and God~~
in that. And finally, a baby's cry; a new born, surely
doomed; and yet there it was, for me at least, that most
magnificent music in all the world. The overture to life...
even in the valley of the shadow. How like God ~~to show~~

and I recalled an essay by the great ^{P.C.} German theologian,
Carl Rahner in which he says that for most of us
the meaningful response to J.C. is to keep on -
to stay at it: to live our lives faithfully & usefully..

~~up in disguise.~~ | How like God to be there in an eloquent,
unmistakable and yet so fragile plea for life. | How subtle,
I thought. | It is foolish to expect divine intervention
which dramatically and miraculously alters the circumstan-
ces. | God isn't going to destroy the missiles, or enforce
a freeze, or lower the radiation level after the blast.
God, instead, will appear in the vulnerable plea of a
new born baby: | a cry which, even in the strained efforts
of a TV special, still asks for a response. | That's the
hope - God ^{will} come and create ^a redemptive possibility, and
the dynamic somehow draws even the spectator in so
that if there is ~~redemption~~ hope it will be because
someone hears the eloquent, vulnerable cry and ~~does~~ something
about it. | How like God. | How like what happened in Bethle-
hem.

Christian hope is an Advent theme and it is predicated
on a doctrine which was forged in one of the bleakest parts
of the Christian story - the time after Jesus, the first
generation of the church. | Christians were being persecuted ^{intensely}
~~fiercely~~ | They ^{were} ~~felt~~ powerless in the face of the Roman
authorities. | They were nothing but a nuisance the empire
had decided to eliminate. | And so when they gathered to
contemplate their own grimly ~~apocalyptic~~ future, they recalled

apocalyptic

the ancient Jewish promise of the Day of the Lord, the restoration of the Davidic monarchy when the king would return. [And they recalled the words of Jesus about the Kingdom of God coming in the world: and they articulated a doctrine about the second coming of Christ on the clouds which shortly became a problem for them and which has confused Christian people ever since.

When interpreted literally ^{the more} ~~their pictures~~ ^{has} of the second coming they left for us ~~in the Bible have~~ stimulated countless folk to sell all their belongings and stand around waiting for the end of the world. [They were doing it in Thessalonica and some folks are still doing it. [The fact that the end didn't come - didn't come as even Jesus said it would, caused the writer of the fourth Gospel, for instance, to suggest that Jesus Christ has already come again: that there is a second coming whenever God's spirit is at work in the human enterprise.

Now because of the excesses of the literalists who are waiting for the end of the world, we don't pay much attention to the doctrine. [and that's too bad because it is where the hope in Christianity is located: not that Jesus is going to descend on clouds and gather all the folk who belong to the right church and consign the

rest of us to hell, but that Jesus Christ will keep showing
up - will not abandon human history - but will keep appear-
ing as a hopeful, redemptive possibility: an energy, if you will,
an impetus in the direction of healing, and reconciliation
and hope. *opposite from the way they are going, the direction*

What it means today is important; namely that we
can count on a redemptive possibility in even the darkest
valleys. Sometimes we may not like the form it takes.
Sometimes we may not recognize it. (We may deplore the
methods of the protestors - but they raise the issue of
life and hope for us. (We can't expect God to intervene
to save the human race, but we can look for God in the
frustrations and impatience and deep love of good people
who are saying to one another now, "let's get together
and talk about this:") instead of quaking in terror, people
who gathered in churches and townhalls and schools last
Monday to share their deep concern for their country and
the whole human race.

God will break in, Christ will come again - ~~personally~~.

— One of my favorite writers Frederick Buechner said in
an interview recently, ("Listen to what's happening in
your own life...to experience) that somehow, even if you
can't say how - seem either to illumine, or to be illumined

*and it will be
personal*

by, religious truth. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. ~~Everybody has such experiences~~ - ~~if not once a day, then once a week...~~ Listen to your life." [Christie Cady 11/83]

I suppose the most common, nearly universal response to Advent is a kind of surprise. (This year is no exception: ~ ~~we're not ready~~: ("don't tell me it's here already! 'Why, it was just Labor Day.") We're not ready and that's just the point. | We never are. | And one of the reasons is that the very event which documents our hope in history - the birth of Jesus - has become such a warmly sentimental holiday: all nostalgia and focussing on the past. | The thrust you see, is meant to be the future. ~~But you can't see ahead if your eyes are locked on the rear-view mirror.~~

The birth is magnificent because of what it portends: namely, a future in which Christ comes again and again; a future in which the baby is born in human hearts in each generation: | a future - full of hope because our forbears were right - "even in the valley of the shadow of death" God will be with us.

Historians speculate that there was a secret code with which those early, hope-filled Christians identified one another. | An intriguing ~~revelant~~ ^{remnant} - ~~an Aramaic phrase~~ - remains in the New Testament, ~~in the very last words,~~ ~~in fact~~ - a single Aramaic

Maranatha: ^{phrase} "Come quickly, Lord Jesus"

It is the locus of our hope. | ~~It is why for centuries~~ ~~Advent has been the beginning of the church year.~~ | It is why we look forward to our future with profound and undying hope. ^{Jesus} ~~Maranatha~~

Come, Lord Jesus. | ~~Amen.~~

"Maranatha."

~~Come~~ May that be our prayer, too. | Even though we may not know what it means... Come, quickly, Lord Jesus. Come with peace - to our world: | come with reconciliation to our nation: | come with healing to our relationships. | - come into our lives - with your love + joy + hope. | Come, Lord Jesus. Amen